DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 363 935 EA 025 406

TITLE Strategic Planning in Utah's Public Schools: Current Status and Recommendations for the Future. A Statewide Study. Executive Summary to the Final Report.

INSTITUTION Western Inst. for Research and Evaluation, Logan, UT.

SPONS AGENCY Utah State Office of Education, Salt Lake City.
PUB DATE Aug 93
NOTE 32p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accountability; *Educational Planning; Elementary Secondary Education; *Long Range Planning; Public Schools; School District Autonomy; State Action; *State Legislation; *State Standards; *Statewide Planning; *Strategic Planning
IDENTIFIERS *Utah

ABSTRACT

This document presents findings of a study that examined the use of strategic planning by Utah schools and school districts. Enacted in 1992, the Utah State Strategic Plan (USSP) authorized and encouraged school districts and schools to engage in strategic planning activities. Data were obtained through telephone interviews with all 40 Utah school district superintendents, a survey of 216 Utah principals (to which 124 responded), and on-site visits to 5 schools. Far more administrators knew "of" strategic planning than those who understood its substance. Administrators expressed much confusion about the relationship of various state-sponsored programs to one another. Both superintendents and principals expressed positive attitudes toward the plan, but identified teachers as the group most likely to be impacted. They identified as impediments to implementation: lack of clear direction and realistic expectations from the state and lack of funding. Recommendations to improve the reporting process include: (1) clarify the roles of stakeholders and the relationship of strategic planning to other state educational initiatives; (2) prevent political intervention; (3) provide funding, training, and information; (4) develop an accurate, feasible, annual reporting process; and (5) recognize the amount of time needed for implementation. (LMI)

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ED 363 935

A Statewide Study

of

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN UTAH'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Current Status and Recommendations for the Future

Submitted to:

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

August 1993

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
to the Final Report

EA 025 406

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS USED FREQUENTLY IN THIS SUMMARY

ESPTF = Education Strategic Planning Task Force (the body created by the legislature to succeed the ESPC and oversee the implementation of HB 162)

HB 162 = House Bill 162 (Utah's 1992 "Strategic Planning for Public Education Act")

USOE = Utah State Office of Education

USSP = Utah State Strategic Plan (officially entitled the "Utah State Public Education Strategic Plan")

WIRE = Western Institute for Research and Evaluation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This executive summary of the results of this study of strategic planning in Utah's public education system contains a brief treatment of each of the following:

- A description of the context in which the study took place
- A description of Utah's strategic plan for public education
- A review of the basic purposes of the study
- An overview of the plan and procedures used to conduct the study
- A summary of the major findings relating to twelve important questions that were addressed in this study
- A summary of nine major recommendations intended to address needs and problems identified by this study
- An overview of elements of a reporting system that the Legislature mandated be developed to provide annual reports of progress in strategic planning in education.

Parenthetical references are inserted to guide the reader who wishes additional detail to the appropriate sections of the separate full report.

Many Utah school superintendents, principals, teachers, and parents directly or indirectly provided the data summarized in this study. Several superintendents and their designees, along with key staff in the State Office of Education and the Legislature, served as an Advisory Committee to steer this study. It is hoped that the results of this study made possible by their cooperation and contributions will be of use to Utah's Legislature and the many educators and parents who are attempting to bring about positive changes in the schools through Utah's Strategic Plan. (A complete list of persons whose efforts were essential to the success of this study is included in the introduction to the complete report.)

Context For This Study

In early 1992, the Utah State Legislature enacted House Bill 162, an authorization for Utah's public schools to engage in strategic planning activities. Although no funds were authorized by the Legislature to support school district efforts to implement HB 162, the Utah State Strategic Plan (USSP) enacted in that legislation was, in many ways, a logical extension of many prior programs that had collectively shaped Utah's education system. If USSP was seen by the Legislature as the seed from which Utah's strategic planning effort would grow, then the ground in which it was planted, plowed, harrowed and made ready by numerous prior state programs. This was recognized by the state's Education Strategic Planning Task Force (ESPTF) when, in late 1992, they identified 14 prior legislative enactments (or programs funded under such enactments) that they viewed as involving sufficient planning to be directly relevant to the USSP, including:

- Education Technology Initiative
- Site-based Decision Making Pilot Program
- Utah's Nine-district Consortium for Designing High Schools for the Future
- Choice in Education Legislation
- Experimental and Developmental Programs
- Awards for Excellence
- Productivity Project Instructional Studies Program
- Outcome-based Education Program
- Shift in Focus Program
- Career Ladders Program

The state's apparent view that activities carried out under so many different funding initiatives could all be viewed as instances of strategic planning may, at first glance, seem overly permissive. With such a broad conception of strategic planning, a great many schools could be judged as fulfilling the expectations of HB 162 while actually their efforts were prompted or

supported by other state funding initiatives. Yet, given the absence of funding to accompany HB 162's requirements, it would seem unreasonable to expect already overburdened schools to undertake additional programs without additional resources to do so.

More to the point, if the state had stipulated that only activities undertaken in direct response to HB 162 would qualify as meeting the intent of that legislation, many Utah educators may well have dismissed the USSP, as one wry observer suggested, as "Merely another unfunded mandate from the Utah State Legislature." But the state did not so stipulate. Rather, it appeared that state leaders on the ESPTF were inclined to allow any activities that include elements of strategic planning to qualify as fulfilling the intent of HB 162, whether the activities were undertaken in direct response to that bill, or in response to other state or local initiatives. Whether or not such a flexible view will lead to the ends HB 162 was intended to attain is one of the questions this study was designed to answer.

(A full discussion of the context in which this study was initiated appears in Section 1.)[1]

Description of Utah's Strategic Plan for Public Education

Strategic Planning is a process whereby an organization develops a consensual vision of its purpose and establishes objectives and strategies for realizing that vision. In January of 1990, the Legislature created a 25 member task force, representing various organizations and agencies with an interest in Utah's educational enterprise, and charged it with developing a five-year strategic plan for education. With eventual involvement of over 200 representatives of Utah's business, industry, government, and education sectors, the resulting USSP was presented to the 1992 Legislature and enacted into law. That enactment authorized and encouraged each school district and public school to "establish strategic planning at both the district and school level" (HB 162, p.6).

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[1]All numbered references to "section" (e.g., "Section 1") in this summary refer to sections of the separate, complete report from which this summary is abstracted. Other references to un-numbered sections refer to sections within this summary.

Utah Strategic Plan Mission Statement

The cornerstone on which the USSP is built is the Public Education System's mission statement:

> Public Education's mission is to assure Utah the best educated citizenry in the world and each individual the training to succeed in a global society, by providing students with learning and occupational skills, character development, literacy, and basic knowledge through a responsive, state-wide system that guarantees local school communities autonomy, flexibility and client choice, while holding them accountable for results.

Strategic Plan Objectives

The USSP objectives are proposed as the measurable things the Public Education System must do to accomplish its mission. The four USSP objectives are:

1. One hundred percent of Utah's students will achieve the objectives of their individually developed Educational/Occupational Plans.

2. Each student departing the public schools will achieve success in productive employment and/or further education.

3. Utah education will be the standard for worldwide education.

4. Utah will achieve the highest per household income in America. (USSP, p. 14)

Strategic Plan Strategies and Action Plans

The USSP contains 11 strategies, which are proposed as broad means by which the system will accomplish the USSP's stated objectives, and action plans to guide implementation of each of the eleven strategies. Too voluminous to be included here, these strategies and action plans can be found in a complete description of the USSP which appears in Section 1.

Major Purposes of This Study

The Legislature had, in HB 158, authorized an important future role for the ESPTF, requiring that it report annually to the State Board of Education, the Legislature, and the Governor on the status of strategic planning in public education. HB 162 further fixed accountability for reporting, requiring each school district and individual school to provide an annual report of its planning activities to its patrons and to the State Board of Education. In turn, the State Board was required to synthesize these reports into a summary report to be presented annually (until 1997) to the ESPTF (HB 162, p. 7).

In this context, the specific impetus for this study came in a May 26, 1992 letter from State Senator Haven J. Barlow and Representative Richard J. Bradford to State Superintendent Scott Bean, requesting that the Utah State Office of Education (USOE) assist them in meeting these requirements. In it, they requested that the USOE take the lead in developing " . . . a progress reporting document. This document should clearly delineate the progress being made at the state, district, and school levels toward implementing the State Strategic Plan for Public Education as outlined in House Bill 162."

The Western Institute for Research and Evaluation (WIRE) was selected by USOE to assist in accomplishing these tasks. The major objectives of the funding award for this project were specified as follows:

> The study would have two primary objectives: (1) identify what is happening in strategic planning throughout the State of Utah, (2) develop a set of instruments that can be used to monitor the progress of strategic planning in schools and districts over the next five years. (USOE Awarded Funds Approval, No. 11309)

Study Plan and Procedures

Twelve specific questions were proposed to focus and guide this study:

1. What is the current level of awareness and understanding of strategic planning (including House Bill 162) among Utah school districts and schools?

2. What are the major sources of information and support for schools and districts to get involved with and implement strategic planning?

3. How long have Utah districts and schools been involved with some form of planning?

4. How many Utah districts currently have a strategic plan or portions of one?

5. What types of strategic planning activities currently exist within Utah's districts and schools?

6. How do leaders and other influential school personnel in Utah's schools perceive the relationship of the USSP to other state initiated education programs?

7. How well do the strategic planning activities within Utah's districts and schools align with the USSP?

8. How do Utah's district and school personnel perceive strategic planning efforts at the school, district, and state level, and the impact they will have on educational programs at these levels?

9. What impediments have slowed or prevented schools from effectively launching strategic planning processes outlined in the USSP?

10. What specific operational steps do schools and school districts perceive as necessary to implement the USSP?

11. What are the stakeholders' recommendations or concerns about strategic planning at the school, district, and state level?

12. What recommendations do district and local school personnel have for reporting strategic planning information that will serve the school, district, and state information needs?

Evaluation Components

To answer the 12 questions listed above, the following seven general study components were proposed.

1. **Identification of USSP stakeholders**. Identify those groups of individuals directly responsible for implementing the USSP (direct stakeholders) and those most directly affected by the outcome of the USSP but not responsible for its implementation (indirect stakeholders).

2. **Advisory panel guidance**. Obtain guidance from a statewide advisory panel, representing both direct and indirect stakeholders, to refine the study plan and procedures.

3. **Description of the USSP**. Describe the USSP and its implementation and have both approved by USOE officials to assure that the study is clearly focused on the correct entity.

4. **Telephone interviews**. Interview all 40 Utah school district superintendents to ascertain their views about the USSP, strategic planning activities in their districts, and their suggestions and preferences for how strategic planning reporting should be accomplished.

5. **Questionnaire survey**. Survey a multi-level stratified random sample of Utah principals to determine what strategic planning activities are currently underway in Utah schools and to obtain their reactions to possible reporting strategies. Of 216 principals sent questionnaires, 124 returned them (57.4% return rate).

6. **On-site visits**. Conduct visits to five schools (selected by USOE and WIRE officials as having significant involvement in strategic planning) to collect in-depth data through case study methods.

7. **Reporting of annual progress of USSP**. Develop procedures for reporting the annual process of USSP that will meet legislative mandates and be acceptable and of use to district and school administrators.

(For a complete description of the study plan and procedures, see Section 2.)

Major Findings of the Study

The 12 major questions that guided this study are used as organizers in this section, with major findings reported in relation to each question. (A full treatment of the findings for each question appear in Section 3.)

1. **What is the current level of awareness and understanding of strategic planning (including House Bill 162) among Utah school districts and schools?**

Far more Utah school administrators know of strategic planning than those who really know much about it. Of those administrators who do know much about it, the majority are more familiar with general strategic planning processes than with the specific planning model embodied in the USSP and HB 162.

District superintendents. Most school superintendents are aware of Utah's strategic planning effort and the fact that the Legislature has passed legislation intended to assure that such planning permeates all Utah schools, but over one third of the superintendents report they have never seen the USSP (despite the fact that the USOE sent a copy to every superintendent). Yet almost all superintendents feel they have received enough information about the USSP through other sources (descriptions and summaries of the USSP provided in most cases by the USOE and/or the Utah School Superintendents' Association). Unfortunately, a significant number of the superintendents are only able to discuss the relationship of either HB 162 or USSP to their school programs in very vague generalities.

Principals. Utah school principals are generally less knowledgeable about strategic planning initiatives than are district superintendents. Approximately 82% say they are aware of the intent of the USSP and HB 162, but only 25% can provide accurate information regarding the details of these initiatives. Yet, a slight majority of the building principals (54%) report that they generally feel comfortable about their "ability to use strategic planning to improve their school, suggesting that they are not restricting strategic planning, in their thinking, to the particular model embodied in the USSP or HB 162.

Teachers. Direct data about teachers' awareness and understanding of the USSP was collected in only five schools (during on-site visits). Only a small proportion of the teachers we interviewed are aware of the USSP or HB 162, and most see strategic planning activities at their school as a school-based activity, not part of a general, statewide effort to move schools toward common goals. This is not surprising, when 23% of the building principals report that they have

never discussed the USSP or HB 162 with their staff, 50% say they have briefly and informally discussed strategic planning in a staff meeting, and only 27% claim to have spent a significant amount of time discussing the USSP and/or HB 162 with their staffs.

2. **What are the major sources of information and support for schools and districts to get involved with and implement strategic planning?**

Superintendents. The two major sources of strategic planning information for superintendents are the USOE (cited by 73% of the superintendents) and the Utah School Superintendents' Association (also cited by 73%).

Principals. The most frequent source of information about strategic planning cited by principals was their district office (69%) and the second is their own research (43%). Other sources included the USOE (32%) and outside consultants (23%). In general, principals report that the state influence on strategic planning at the local school level has been rather modest and indirect. The statewide documents associated with strategic planning have not had a dramatic or direct effect on what is happening at individual schools, partly because they do not contain specific guidance to help schools take each step necessary in strategic planning. One principal stated well the sentiment of many when he said that it was ironic that the state apparently had no plan to propose to a school for how they should implement the state's strategic plan.

3. **How long have Utah districts and schools been involved with some form of strategic planning?**

Approximately 12% of the principals reported that their school had never engaged in strategic planning. Interestingly, only 22% reported that they had begun strategic planning activities after HB 162 was passed. About 66% reported that their school's involvement in strategic planning had begun before HB 162, with 11% claiming they have been engaged in such planning efforts for five years of longer. While some of these reports may be a product of an overly generous definition of strategic planning, there is little doubt that many principals have become quite competent in strategic planning through personal reading and interactions with others involved

in similar planning activities. From examining this issue--length of involvement with strategic planning--it once again appears that other factors may be more influential than the USSP or HB 162 in stimulating schools to launch strategic planning efforts.

4. How many Utah districts currently have a strategic plan or portions of one?

According to USOE records, 31 of Utah's 40 districts have completed or made significant progress on a strategic plan of some type. Of these, 20 have completed or are well along in developing strategic plans that appear to fit reasonably well the definition of strategic planning contained in the USSP. The other 11 districts report that they have completed district plans but they do not fit the definition of strategic planning implicit in the state initiatives. Rather, they seem to be residual plans or processes of other, earlier efforts (e.g., the ODDM process).

5. What types of strategic planning activities currently exist within Utah's districts and schools?

Many activities are going on in Utah schools that are clearly relevant to the main intent and thrust of the Utah State Strategic Plan. Many activities that have been initiated under other funding initiatives (e.g., Site-based Decision Making, Education Technology Initiative, Shift in Focus) have been redirected or altered slightly so they might simultaneously further the objectives of strategic planning, or at least comply with what school administrators believe is expected of them in the planning area. (Such a "two-fer" mentality is understandable, given the fact that there is no money earmarked for strategic planning and districts and schools are thereby forced to piggyback it on existing activities, if they are to do it at all.)

More strategic planning efforts in the state appear to be proceeding according to the Cambridge model than any other. A key step in this model is to create task forces which develop action plans for accomplishing the mission and objectives of the district or school. Such task forces exist in some form or another at most Utah schools. The completion of the first round of the strategic planning process is dependent of these committees spelling out how the district or school will approach the tasks associated with their strategic plan. While some districts and

schools have such action plans they are following, many do not. And some that do have action plans can now readily see that successful completion of those plans is dependent on receiving support from their district or the state, primarily in the form of additional funding.

6. **How do leaders and other influential personnel in Utah's schools perceive the relationship of the USSP to other state initiated education programs?**

This question nearly defies an answer, for there are as many different answers as there are people to perceive these relationships. Some see clear distinctions between the USSP, site-based decision making, Centennial Schools, and other state initiated education programs. Others see them as merely different lenses of the same lamp and feel if they are doing one they clearly are doing the other. Some see sufficient links between any two state-funded or state-initiated efforts to feel that involvement in any such program qualifies as participation in any other.

In its simplest sense, those we spoke to evidenced enormous confusion and disagreement about how or whether the various state-sponsored programs are intended to relate to one another. There is such a welter of differing opinions on this question that one of the state's highest priorities should be to clarify how they see the various state programs fitting together -- or apart, for that fact. Lack of clarity on this point will continue a state of confusion that has become frustrating and dysfunctional to many educators.

7. **How well do the strategic planning activities within Utah's districts and schools align with the USSP?**

Because of the breadth and comprehensiveness of the USSP, most of the educational renewal, reform, and improvement activities in the schools can be said to relate to one or most portions of the USSP. However, some of the activities many superintendents reported their district or local schools are currently pursuing appear to be more likely than others to have been inspired by the USSP or HB 162. For example, Planning/Reviewing/Revising, Technology, Site-based Decision Making, Community/Parent Involvement, and Curriculum Review are either specifically mentioned or closely related to elements of the state's strategic plan. However, it

is also possible to simply consider most, if not all of these, as common concerns with which school administrators must routinely deal. The issue is whether the state's interest in strategic planning has led superintendents and principals to do new planning or simply to label what they have already been doing with a new label.

This question is heightened by the fact that only 25% of the principals reported they are acquainted with the details of the USSP or HB 162, yet 72% indicate that their plans conform to the state strategic plan. This suggests the possibility that loose conformance, or simply doing something somewhat associated with the state initiative, is enough for them to feel that they are "on board" and meeting the state's intent. In this context, the fact that some of the issues outlined in the state's strategic plan are reflected in the district and local plans cannot be taken as evidence that they are the *result* of the state plan. It is simply not possible to sort out causality in the absence of any systematic mechanism developed or used by the Legislature or the USOE to disseminate information and monitor the results in a way that would allow the influence of the law or the USSP to be traced.

Also, while some of the primary activities being pursued by districts or schools under their strategic plans are clearly related to those identified in the USSP and HB 162 (whether or not the link is causal), the districts and/or schools are not systematically pursuing all, or even most, of the eleven strategies and their attendant action plans in the USSP. For example, key issues such as Assessment, handling At-risk Students, Business Partnerships, Core Committees, Hiring and Retaining Quality Teachers, Restructuring, and so on, that are closely related to elements of the state's strategic plan, were mentioned by only a few district superintendents as issues they were addressing in their planning activities. If the state's intent is to assure that all districts and schools attend to all of the areas the USSP identifies as crucial, a more intensive and targeted effort will be required on the part of the state to ensure that local educators are understanding and responding to the state programs as planned.

8. **How do Utah's district and school personnel perceive strategic planning efforts at the school, district, and state level, and the impact such efforts will have on educational programs at these levels?**

Superintendents. Most of the school superintendents are generally positive about the potential impact of the state's strategic plan, but their most frequently cited reservation was that "It will have an impact only if funded." They perceive that strategic planning will most heavily impact teachers (33%), followed by budget (25%), curriculum (25%), parents (20%), technology (13%), administrative workload (13%) and students (10%). The superintendents noted that the impact would be potentially negative on several of these, unless training and funding are provided. For example, teachers and administrators will be expected to do more, especially in administrative and curriculum matters; more meetings and more work will require more funding.

When superintendents were asked to identify the greatest strengths of the state's strategic plan, the three mentioned most frequently were that the state's plan provides a "focus for planning the future or public education" (22%), "empowers local schools" (21%), and follows a "statewide grassroots approach, empowering citizens in the educational system" (15%). An interesting implication of the empowerment issue, both for educators and citizens, is that it suggests that the process modeled in the state's plan is more important than the particulars of the strategies and action plans it contains. If local educators and citizens are to be empowered, it seems strange to think that their role is to implement someone else's strategic plan, rather than to create their own for their district and school. There seems to be an inherent tension between any statewide; "top-down" effort and a local "bottom-up" approach.

Principals. A strong majority of school principals (78%) say they support the state's strategic plan (although only 25% are completely clear about what it contains), and a smaller majority (58%) feel it will improve the education process in Utah. A similar majority of the principals (61%) reported, however, that their teachers are neutral or negative toward the state's plan (which is not surprising, since relatively few teachers are really familiar with the plan). This is an area of concern that deserves attention. If teachers will be impacted by the state's strategic plan more than any group, but only a minority of teachers are positive toward it, there

is a strong likelihood of teacher resistance or backlash, especially if teachers are not better informed and helped to see benefits in implementing the USSP.

9. What impediments have slowed or prevented schools from effectively launching strategic planning processes outlined in the USSP?

The district superintendents mentioned several impediments, with the most frequently mentioned being: a lack of clear direction and realistic expectations from the state (36%), lack of funding (33%), the need for more inservice training and communication (15%) , and patience in implementing the process (11%). School principals also mentioned several impediments, citing most frequently lack of funding (38%), lack of a clear direction for implementation (31%), and inadequate time to plan (12%).

10. What specific operational steps do schools and school districts perceive as necessary to implement the USSP?

Among all the suggestions given, there are three that were repeated over and over again, to the point where others faded into relative insignificance. They are:

(1) Provide funding to support schools' strategic planning efforts.

(2) Provide released time for practitioners to engage in strategic planning.

(3) Develop training materials and provide school and district personnel with training in strategic planning.

In the area of training, school administrators are divided on what type of training they desire. Some want specific training in the strategic planning approach embodied in the USSP, including step-by-step guidelines for how it can be implemented. Others would prefer training in the general process of strategic planning, rather than training in following the USSP or any other specific strategic planning model or approach, so that schools could be empowered to choose their own form of strategic planning.

11. **What are the stakeholders' recommendations or concerns about strategic planning at the school, district, and state level?**

Several themes arose out of the questionnaire, interview and site visit responses, but three stand out. The most frequent and fervent recommendation made at all levels was that the Legislature move quickly to provide funding for strategic planning, if it is to continue its present posture that strategic planning is a mandated school activity. From many administrators there was resentment to the point of hostility toward what they saw as the absurdity of requiring that schools engage in significant efforts that cannot be completed even minimally, let alone well, without additional resources, and then fail to provide those resources. Administrators state clearly that, without supplemental funding, the strategic planning process takes critical time and personnel resources from other essential activities.

A second theme raised by stakeholders is the recognition that the strategic planning process must be allowed to unfold over time. Time is needed for the strategic planning, the specific articulation of action plans, and the implementation of the action plans. The effort must be supported over time to allow plans to progress all the way to fruition. Even many administrators who are very supportive of strategic planning are hesitant about committing their school(s) fully to the effort, for fear that a new Legislature will reassign strategic planning to a lower priority, resulting in wasted effort and disenchantment of teachers. The superintendents and principals feel strongly that stability and continuity of support for strategic planning must somehow be assured at the state level if it is ever to help at the school level.

A third theme that emerged reveals the concern of many that strategic planning should be essentially a bottom-up process. The local school patrons, staff and professional educators need to "buy into" the process and its outcomes before it is likely that they will be fully implemented. It is not clear to the districts and local schools just what role the state initiatives are supposed to play in a planning process that should be locally determined. Many Utah educators feel that the state strategic plans should not be a major constraint on local, building-based planning. In fact, they believe it would be inconsistent for the state to adopt a particular state plan that stresses local autonomy and then dictate that everyone follow that plan.

12. **What recommendations do district and local school personnel have for reporting strategic planning information that will serve the school, district, and state information needs?**

This question was posed to determine what report format(s) and content would ensure cooperation of the superintendents and principals who would either provide or control access to information needed for the annual strategic planning progress report mandated by the Legislature. There were many suggestions about reporting format, including the need for instructions and examples to help respondents fill out the forms at the desired level of detail. Not surprisingly, most district and local school administrators wanted a brief reporting form although there was no consensus as to what type of form should be used. Clearly, simplicity and low workload were the two most critical factors in the reporting process. Rather than attempt to present all of those format suggestions here, however, suffice to say they have been incorporated and will be evident in the proposed reporting process presented in a later section.

For most respondents, however, the format issue was secondary to the issue of timing of the information request. Several prominent administrators were extremely critical of the Legislature and the USOE because of their timing in requesting information. They complained about short turnaround times that were insensitive to their schedules. Specifically, administrators pointed out that requests for proposals, required reports, etc. seemed to come due primarily in April and May, when administrators are extremely busy trying to end the school year successfully. Several administrators cited the timeline for application for Centennial School funds to be a classic example of these points.

A closely related concern expressed by many administrators had to do with lead time to respond. It was strongly suggested that any required report form be disseminated early in the school year so schools could have several months to collect adequate information to respond more intelligently, as well as stretching the work of responding over a longer period of time.

When queried about the content of the annual reporting process, most school and district administrators said they believe it is important that any reports of strategic planning activities

include ways to clearly identify those efforts that are successful, so that those efforts can be shared with other districts for their possible adoption or adaptation. Many administrators ask that the "best practices" of strategic planning be identified and broadly disseminated through Utah schools. In addition, many of the administrators wish to have schools identify the difficulties they've encountered and suggested ways that have helped them resolve those difficulties. The principals' responses suggest that the reports should not only be sent to the state to show what each school has accomplished, but also made available to other schools to facilitate sharing of successes and solutions to problems.

A brief summary of the elements of a proposed annual reporting process that will meet the legislative mandate and also enhance the cooperation of school personnel appears in the final section of this executive summary.

Recommendations

As a vehicle for restructuring education, strategic planning holds considerable promise. Many key stakeholders regard strategic planning very positively, which shows significant progress toward adopting strategic planning as a vehicle for improvement.

However, this study has identified several impediments to the full implementation of strategic planning or the adoption of the USSP by all stakeholders, impediments so serious they could derail the strategic planning process, unless they are understood and addressed.

To help overcome these impediments, several recommendations are offered that will, collectively, facilitate full implementation of the strategic planning process. The recommendations are not ordered by importance but rather sequentially so that each lays the groundwork for the one that follows.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Establish (1) shared commitment to the USSP goals, and (2) a unified direction among the Governor's office, the Legislature and the USOE concerning what strategic planning school districts and individual schools should do and how this relates to the USSP.

Many stakeholders believe the current objectives stated for the USSP are unrealistic, citing such examples as "Utah will attain the highest per household income in America." While acknowledging these as wonderful ideals, they view them as unattainable (and therefore discouraging) in a state confronted with Utah's total school enrollment and level of per pupil expenditures. If schools are to commit themselves to attaining the USSP objectives, they must be convinced those goals are within their reach. The State needs either to re-state the goals at realistic levels or, alternately, show Utah educators that the highly idealistic goals can actually be reached.

Also, most Utah educators are unclear about just what role the USSP and other state initiatives related to strategic planning are intended to play in their local district and individual school strategic planning efforts. Different roles for the USSP can be understood from the USSP document, HB 162 and the governor's Centennial Schools plan. For example, while the USSP underscores the importance of empowering local school and community stakeholders to determine the most appropriate way for their school to achieve USSP's mission statement, it also presents a complete set of strategies (accompanied by action plans) that could be viewed as prescriptive. In fact, the USSP document states: "The strategies explain how the system will accomplish the objectives and thus realize the mission. As such, the strategies embody the Strategic Plan's primary controlling force, acting to direct and shape all efforts that carry the plan forward to fulfillment." (p.9)

This language has been interpreted by some as meaning that school districts and individual schools need to work toward the implementation of <u>all</u> the USSP strategies and action plans. Yet, the Centennial Schools program (application packet for the Centennial Schools Section 53A-1a-302) appears to encourage schools to (1) focus their efforts on only a limited number of the

USSP strategies, and (2) develop their own action plans. The Governor and key stakeholders at the state level see Centennial Schools as a clearcut example of strategic planning, apparently seeing no jingle-jangle between two enactments. But real confusion exists in many schools regarding the relationship between these two initiatives. A number of educators told us they are confused about whether a school proposing to use only one USSP strategy in its Centennial Schools bid would be fulfilling the USSP requirements written into HB 162. Such confusion must be addressed and dispelled before districts and schools will know what actions and criteria for success are pertinent.

For example, if the State's intent is that every school and district will adopt the USSP as their strategic plan, then local strategic planning committees will act to adopt the USSP and success will be defined by the fidelity and quality of the adoption. The most successful school will have a strategic plan exactly like the USSP and will have successfully implemented the action plans of the USSP at their school.

Conversely, if the USSP is meant as only a guide for the substance and process of strategic planning, then the most successful school will have implemented a process involving a broad-based planning committee in stating common beliefs, a mission statement, strategies and goals which establish for the school or district a plan for accomplishing the changes that they feel best address their needs. The criteria for success will center on the degree of involvement, integrity and consensus associated with the planning process.

In short, before it is reasonable to expect full implementation of strategic planning in the state, it is necessary that those perceived to be the initiators of the documents (the Governor, Legislature, and USOE) be in complete harmony as to its scope, content, and intent, and whether or not it is mandated. If those initiators are already unified on these matters, it is only necessary that their unified position be clearly communicated to Utah's local school educators. It not, the following recommendations will facilitate establishing the unified direction needed if strategic planning is to become a potent force in improving Utah's Public Education System.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Define the role of strategic planning in relationship to all other state educational initiatives.

While many individual and organizational stakeholders have personal perceptions of how strategic planning interfaces with other State initiatives, there is no consistency in such views across or within stakeholder groups. This apparent confusion exists from the State level on down, increasing in intensity as it descends to the local school level. Some questions that could be asked to clarify the intended role of the USSP and how it relates to other initiatives include:

- Is there one model of strategic planning that is preferred over another?
- Is the State satisfied if schools engage in strategic planning as a process, or must they use the particular strategies and action plans included in the USSP?
- Now that the state has a strategic plan, should all initiatives existing before its creation be connected and channeled under the strategic plan in a coherent master plan?
- Are there currently funded initiatives that do not seem to be in harmony with the state's strategic plan? If so, how should the conflict be resolved?

A working understanding of how Utah's strategic planning initiative relates to all other State initiatives must be agreed upon by all key stakeholders, beginning with those who have instigated development of the USSP.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Define the roles and expectations of all stakeholders in relationship to the USSP, including clear direction for implementation and procedures for accountability.

Once strategic planning and its relationship with other State initiatives is defined, the next question logically becomes, "What is the necessary role and expectation of each stakeholder, individually and collectively, to assure that the intent of the strategic plan is realized?" In some cases, USSP action plans pinpoint the responsible parties who should participate. Where specific

responsibility has been fixed, it usually rests on someone at a statewide level, leaving educators at the district and local school level unsure of their role. In order for strategic planning to work, all parties must know what is expected of them. Clear statements of the responsibility and accountability of each stakeholder (the Governor, the State Board of Education, the USOE, school districts, and individual schools) for implementation of the USSP need to be spelled out.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Define and incorporate a consistent philosophy and communication/management style at the state level which enables the intent of the strategic plan to be realized.

A number of educators expressed concern as to the relationship of the empowerment philosophy embedded in the USSP and the perception of a more rigid, "top down" mandate to implementing the USSP that permeates HB 162. Whether this perception is consistent with the state's intent or is warranted is irrelevant; it exists and needs to be addressed in order for the USSP to be a positive instrument for educational improvement in Utah.

RECOMMENDATION #5

Improve trust and responsiveness in the strategic planning process by preventing political intervention.

If recommendation #4 is adhered to, then trust and responsiveness to change should flourish in Utah's districts, and the objectives of the strategic plan should be more attainable. Empowering stakeholders with increased autonomy and flexibility, as stated in the mission statement of the USSP, should result in increased trust and quicker acceptance of the USSP by all stakeholder groups. However, some stakeholders in leadership positions at the state, district, and local levels seem to find it hard to accept genuine, local empowerment. For example, several incidences were reported where the empowerment concept has been trampled on by local boards or others in power and authority who rejected the school's strategic plan until the planning committee made every detail in it consistent with the governing board's wishes. Recognizing that this new perspective of governance will take some time to get used to, measures might be

needed to preclude "over-governance" to ensure that the processes of strategic planning and site-based decision making are allowed to work as intended. Boards and others in leadership positions need to be oriented in how to perform their proper role in fostering and responding to the empowerment of others.

RECOMMENDATION #6

> **Provide funding to support the strategic planning process and to support the implementation of the strategic and action plans resulting from the strategic planning process.**

The deterrent to strategic planning most often mentioned by stakeholders is funding. Three types of funding have been recommended. The first is funding necessary to support the strategic planning process itself. The second, closely related, is funding for inservice training of those involved in the strategic planning process. The third is funding to implement the outcomes or activities spawned by the strategic planning process that cannot be accomplished within existing budgets. Utah's educators clearly equate commitment and priority with funding. Without adequate funding, the schools simply will not believe there is real commitment to strategic planning at the State level, and little or no genuine strategic planning will occur, regardless of how vigorously it is mandated.

RECOMMENDATION #7

> **Be considerate of the time (both during each year and across years) that the strategic planning process takes in development and implementation, and make a long-term commitment to strategic planning.**

Districts and schools need to allocate time to the development of strategic planning. Their commitment to strategic planning will be enhanced if funding is provided for time spent on the development of the plan.

Also, state policymakers must exercise patience in terms of how quickly they expect to see strategic planning impact on educational outcomes. Research on strategic planning suggests that

the full benefits of strategic planning will not be realized until the process has been in use for at least seven years. Many Utah educators, although quite positive about strategic planning, seem hesitant to commit fully to the process, because they have seen other state initiatives abandoned at mid-stream in the past, as priorities of the Legislature or the State Board of Education have shifted with changing of personnel in those bodies. Evidence of a long-term commitment of the State to strategic planning will be pivotal in convincing Utah's educational practitioners to commit their best efforts to such processes.

RECOMMENDATION #8

Provide inservice training and essential information regarding the USSP to the various stakeholders.

Providing clear communication and appropriate inservice training to the various stakeholders is another critical part of implementing strategic planning. Timely and consistent communication from the State regarding the status of the USSP and its consequences will encourage districts and schools as they implement strategic planning. District communication with local schools and with one another will also help by sharing lessons learned and successes earned through strategic planning. Such cross-district sharing will not occur if not facilitated and supported by the State. Inservice training will also be essential to help the many educators who, although they feel positive about strategic planning in general, have little confidence in their ability to use strategic planning processes in developing their own strategic plan.

RECOMMENDATION #9

Develop and implement a process to assure that annual progress reporting in strategic planning will provide accurate and useful information for policymakers and other stakeholders at the state, district, and local school levels.

Because of the centrality of this recommendation in meeting the legislative mandate, it is treated in the following, separate section of this summary.

PROPOSED PROCESS FOR REPORTING ANNUAL PROGRESS IN STRATEGIC PLANNING

The Utah Legislature has mandated that the USSP:

> . . . shall be reviewed annually by the Legislature through a designated education strategic planning committee until the year 1997, for the purpose of evaluating progress towards achieving the intent and objectives outlined in this chapter and also effecting any necessary changes. (HB 162, Section 53A-1a-102)

Furthermore, the responsibility of schools and of the Utah Board of Education (and by implication the USOE, that carries out necessary activities for that Board) in this reporting process is spelled out:

> (4) (a) *Each* school district *and public school* [italics added] shall make an annual report to its patrons on its activities under this section.
> (b) The reporting process shall involve participation from teachers, parents, and the community-at-large in determining how well the district or school is performing.
> (c) The State Board of Education shall receive a copy of each report and make a summary report to the strategic planning committee referred to in Section 53A-1a-102. (HB 162, Section 53 A-1a-106)

This then outlines the annual responsibility of the USOE, as an instrument of the State Board, to see that annual reports from both individual schools and districts are prepared and aggregated into an Annual Progress Report to be submitted to the State Board. Presumably, this report or a condensation will be forwarded by the Board to the ESPTF who will receive that report and present whatever portions of it they judge necessary to enable the legislature to fulfill their legal responsibility of seeing that schools are acting accountably in their implementation of HB 162.

These legislative mandates seem, on their surface, to be straightforward, but in actuality implementing them may be problematic, for three reasons outlined below.[2]

[2]A full discussion of these three factors, which are pivoted in the success of any State reporting system, appears in Section 5.

1. The role assigned to the USOE is delicate and difficult

USOE officials and staff are routinely assigned to oversee the implementation of legislation or executive decisions and policies of the State Board. Thus the USOE is often seen by many school practitioners as the "enforcement arm" of higher authorities in the state. USOE officials and staff must therefore work hard to overcome antipathy from district and school personnel that is as unfortunate--although as natural and understandable--as is the general public's feelings about highway patrolman and tax auditors. The fact that the USOE provides much useful, direct service to schools seems to be forgotten whenever USOE officials are assigned by the Legislature or the Board to carry out any coordinating or accountability function in those same schools.

This problem seldom creates more sensitivity and backlash than when the USOE requests schools to report on how well they have implemented state-mandated programs or processes, especially if the mandate for the particular program or process is not accompanied by any additional funds for implementing it. For some, requiring that they report back to the state seems to demonstrate a lack of trust from above. For more, it is simply the irritant most busy people feel when asked to stop to "fill out paperwork" for which they see little or no use. Whatever their feeling, it is important that the proposed annual reporting procedures and instruments be designed so as to provide the information about strategic planning called for in HB 162, without causing practitioners to respond negatively to the requests for information about their strategic planning activities and progress.

2. Cooperation of school personnel must be gained

It is well known that school personnel are, with few exceptions, overextended in trying to fulfill all that is expected of them in their role. It is also well known that such busy practitioners often view filling out various state reports as roughly equal in priority to counting up the weekly lunch money. One of the reasons that school personnel manage to conceal any enthusiasm they may feel for the task of filling out required reports is that there is seldom any direct reward or benefit from the state for their complying promptly and completely (or penalty if they do not). It would seem likely that more persons would fill out an information form if they could see that doing

so may somehow benefit them. We propose a system that could provide direct benefit for those who fill out the strategic planning report form(s).

3. **There is lack of clarity about exactly what constitutes strategic planning and, therefore, what should be reported.**

In the prior section on findings, we alluded to the fact that the state's strategic planning initiative often blurs in the minds of school personnel with what they perceive as "look-alike" legislation, or at least gets tangled with legislative initiatives that overlap sufficiently with the USSP to create confusion in the minds of those who must do the reporting. The reporting system we propose, and the steps for developing it, take this factor into account and, if adopted, should alleviate it.

Assumptions Underlying the Proposed Reporting System

Providing timely and dependable information of the type mandated in HB 162 will require a reporting process/system with the following characteristics:

1. Information will be obtained from each public school and school district.
2. The information will not depend on any one single source, but will be collected from samples of all relevant stakeholders.
3. Providing the information will benefit the school/district, thus enhancing the likelihood of all schools and districts reporting.
4. Reports will be provided not only to the USOE, State Board of Education, ESPTF, and the Legislature, but also to teachers, parents, and the community-at-large.
5. Information will be sought from different stakeholder groups, using information collection strategies tailored to fit those groups.
6. Those asked to submit reports will be provided with instructions and sample reports designed to help them understand the type of information needed.
7. Those who are asked to provide information will be given ample lead time to do so, and reporting will not be requested at the "peak load" periods in the cycle of public school activities.

8. Most data for the strategic planning annual report will be straightforward, self-report data; in addition, data from a few representative on-site visits will be included to enrich and extend the self-report data.

9. A limited amount of technical assistance will be available to those schools/districts who need help in completing any portion of their report form.

Proposed Ingredients of the Annual Strategic Planning Reporting System

It is proposed that the reporting system designed to provide annual information on the status and progress of strategic planning in Utah, as stipulated in HB 162, include the eight components listed below. (Full discussion of each of these eight components appears in Section 5.)

1. Instructions and Examples to Accompany Requests for Information

Each USOE request for a school district to provide information about strategic planning should come with streamlined, simplified, but helpful instructions sufficient to allow all respondents to provide the desired information at an appropriate level of detail.

2. Separate Reporting Forms for Different Stakeholder Groups

Given their different perspectives of the strategic planning process, it seems shortsighted to expect that all stakeholders could provide equally useful answers to the same set of questions. Four separate reporting instruments are proposed,[3] respectively designed to be completed by: (1) district superintendents and/or district strategic planning facilitators, (2) school principals or their designee in charge of strategic planning, (3) classroom teachers and other professional staff in the school, and (4) parents of school students and community members at large.

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[3]Originally, it was intended that these four instruments would be developed as a part of the present study, but that turned out to be infeasible, or at least inefficient, because of the need to have ESPTF approval of the process first, to avoid potential waste effort in developing and piloting instruments the ESPTF may deem redundant. Therefore, time and personnel resources intended for instrument development were diverted to allow more comprehensive data collection for other components of this study.

3. Provision to Answer Questions and Provide Technical Assistance

Even with careful instructions and information forms tailored to the respondent, occasions will arise when help must be provided to answer the respondent's question(s). It is proposed that the USOE should either (1) appoint a USOE staff member to serve as an on-call resource to answer questions from school district personnel who need clarification about some aspect of the required report, or (2) identify and arrange for an external agency or individual to serve that function.

4. A System for Aggregating School and District Reports

Because HB 162 calls for individual school and district reports to be received by the State Board and synthesized into a report for the ESPTF, that obviously means operationally, that the synthesis and summarization will be delegated to the USOE. Whoever does it, summarizing 40 district reports (and more than 600 independent school reports, if the stipulations of HB 162 were to be strictly enforced) is a non-trivial task. It will only be feasible if the questions posed on the district and school forms are designed so they can be summarized across all schools to answer each question for the entire district, and then summarized again across districts to provide a portrayal for the entire state on each question.

5. A Sample of On-site Visits Each Year to Provide Illustrative Case Studies

Though not mandated by HB 162, there would be great merit in each year studying more intensely a small sample of schools involved in strategic planning to understand the factors that underlie successes and those that serve as stumbling blocks. There is also a side benefit: simply making schools and districts aware that some site visits will occur, and that there is a possibility that they may be selected, leads to across-the-board improvements in school programs (see data on site visits to Utah schools presented in Worthen and White, 1987, p. 122-123).

6. Schedule for the Annual Reporting Process

The major reason school administrators are unenthusiastic about filling out reports required by the State is not how much time it takes, but rather when that time is taken. It is proposed that all requests for strategic planning information be sent to schools in early November and responses accepted anytime up to May 15. Such scheduling could eliminate much of the present criticism about report requirements.

7. Disseminate Broadly Summary Reports of Strategic Planning Activities

We propose that the USOE consider producing a simple annual report (in a brief executive summary form) on the status of strategic planning in Utah, to be sent not only to state governing and legislative bodies, but also back to the districts and schools whose staff provided the information that made it possible.

8. Incentives to Increase Responses

It would also be useful if the USOE could produce or cause to be produced a quarterly newsletter that contained examples of success in launching strategic planning efforts, "how to" suggestions, and the like. This newsletter and the annual report summary mentioned in the preceding section could be sent free of charge to all those who sent in a completed survey report form, thus serving as an incentive to complete and return the report form as requested. Such low cost strategies may prove to be the best investment Utah can make in obtaining good information about how well strategic planning is fairing in our state.

Summary

These eight proposed components will result in as simple a reporting process as possible while still adhering to the reporting stipulations outlined by the Legislature in HB 162. If the reporting principles and components outlined here are accepted by the ESLTF, they can then be developed into the actual reporting instruments and procedures needed in any complete and adequate reporting system for strategic planning in Utah.